

Minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting for Sonning Common held at the Village Hall Wood Lane on Monday 14 May at 19.30 hrs.

The meeting was chaired by Mr Douglas Kedge, Chairman of the Parish Council.

Those present included: Miss Hunt, Ms Noble, Mrs Phillips-Tilbury, Mrs Lewis, Mr Greenwood, Mr Fort, Mr Stoves, Mr Reynolds, Mrs MacGowan, Mrs Diwell (members of the Parish Council); Mr P Simms (Henley Standard) plus 16 members of the public and representatives of local organisations.

APM 1. The minutes of the last Annual Parish Meeting held on 18 April 2011 were approved.

APM 2. There were no matters arising.

APM 3. Chairman's address. Mr Kedge spoke briefly to welcome everyone to the meeting and hoped that all would hear something of interest about activities in the village and of the Parish Council.

APM 4. Short activity reports were made on the following topics:

Twining (France) – Jo Quinton reported on considerable progress with the steering group visiting France in June to be followed by an open meeting in the Primary School in July.

Library – Ros Varnes described the long saga that has led to the present position where it is proposed that the staffing will have to be split 50:50 between professionals and volunteers. The end game still has to be reached. When more information is available from the county council about the proposed introduction of volunteers (e.g. timescale and training opportunities), the Friends of Sonning Common Library propose to hold a public meeting to share that information with the community. It is hoped that some new people will join the Friends group at that stage to help recruit and manage the library volunteers.

Neighbourhood Planning - Design Day Report. Barrie Greenwood's report is attached.

Footpaths – John Stoves described how having walked all with Gail Noble there are ongoing efforts to get resurfacing work done by OCC.

Youth Club (ClubSC) – Colin Reynolds told of the progress the club has made to provide a safe and secure environment for youngsters. Membership has risen from 40 to over 100 in the year. Funding remains a serious challenge and more sponsorship is needed.

Sonning Common Magazine – Chrissie Phillips-Tilbury outlined the continuing success of the magazine that goes to all 1900 homes in the village. The editorial standard remains high due to the sterling efforts of Ros Varnes and Diana Pearman.

Skate Park – now being referred to as the Rollerpark – Carol Lewis briefed the meeting as attached.

Allotments – John Stoves outlined progress made building on Alan Rooke's work. More work is needed on the car park, on hedging and fencing and on maintaining the access track around the outside.

Road Safety/Snow Plan/Knotweed – Dirk Jones spoke on these matters as attached.

Widmore Pond – Jane Diwell sent in the attached report.

Village Hall – Douglas Kedge circulated a short report from Sue Frayling-Cork and congratulated her on the new art displays.

More councillors - Douglas Kedge outlined how busy all members are now and the possibility of increasing the size of the council. Such a change cannot be considered until the District Council review has been completed by the Boundary Commission later in the year.

Before the meeting closed Mr Thomas proposed a vote of thanks to the Parish Council for progress made in the past year. This was supported by all present.

Chairman Dated

PROPOSED SKATE/ROLLER PARK IN SONNING COMMON – Carole Lewis

The smaller children in Sonning Common are well catered for with three well maintained play areas, but as there is no facility for the older children, the Parish Council decided to look into the possibility of creating a skate/roller park. To that end, a Working Party was established. Various sites were investigated, but these did not confirm with the size, noise, access criteria required.

Following the acquisition of the Bishopswood sports area by the Rotherfield United Football Club, the Parish Council were offered space on this site for the Skate/Roller park - at a cost of £7,000. This is considered to be a good location because;

1. Access is reasonably easy across the public footpath from Woodlands Road and this provides a safe route for the youngsters. However, a public right of way over a couple of yards/metres between the footpath and the site will have to be established.
2. It is far away enough from nearby housing to avoid noise problems
3. the site is flat and suitable for construction of the skate park

There are several issues that need addressing

1. We have been advised that Planning Permission is not required: however permission is required for the 'operational development', and this includes a consideration of crime prevention, site design, the management and maintenance of the site, and forestry issues. Health and safety issues will also need to be addressed.
2. A Skate Park Committee would be set up, comprising Parish Councillors, youngsters who would use the park, plus some parents.
3. Bore holes would need to be drilled to establish the viability of the land.

Once all these basic, but necessary things have been resolved, it will then be time to start the fund raising . . . a mammoth task in its own right!

REPORTS FROM DIRK JONES

1) ROAD SAFETY:

1.1 Petition Success:

Almost 600 walkers, cyclists, and residents, signed a petition in the summer of last year to ask for help in making the crossing by the Bird in Hand B481 crossroads safer.

The junction is the designated crossing point for the 'Chilterns Cycleway' and the 'Chiltern Way Extension' for walkers, which includes our 'Millennium Green'.

The petition was adopted by this Parish Council for further investigation and with the help of our County Councillor, Mrs Carol Viney, it was agreed to fund a 'Speed Indicating Device' (SID) for south-bound traffic approaching the junction.

This new SID will mirror the pre-existing SID already installed on the north-bound approaches. (The latter was installed by the Parish Council some 5 years ago, along with another on the north-bound Kennylands Road site)

1.2 Speeding:

This continues to be a problem on both the B481 Peppard Road and along the Kennylands Road with ad-hoc radar speed checks being carried out by Thames Valley Police when resources permit.

It would appear that a majority of speeding occurs during the commuting and school run congestion periods, and drivers are mostly local to the area. It has also been noted by residents that a number of drivers still persist in using mobile phones whilst driving.

More resources are required to counter this problem and it has been suggested that local manpower could be trained to use suitable technology to assist the Police in this matter.

1.3 Road Parking:

Sonning Common is a magnet for local shopping and the daily transport of about 1,000 children to and from our two major schools. It is focal point for congestion at almost any time of day.

Whilst the land is scarce, the Parish Council is endeavouring to procure more formal parking areas. Existing official car parking spaces are often unavailable, being (hogged) on a long term basis by employees of local traders and some residents.

We still await the arrival of the double yellow lines at various junction choke points around the village. These will not reduce road parking spaces but will allow the enforcement of the Highway Code on where it is not legal to park, and enhance traffic flow and pedestrian safety.

1.4 Pavement Parking:

Unlike London, there is no specific pavement parking law in Sonning Common, other than those laid down in the Highway Code. The obstruction of pavement space for the safe passage of pedestrians is an on-going problem and often a matter for Police interpretation.

Where 'convenience' pavement parking is prevalent, for example outside the two 'take away' food outlets, consideration should be given to physically protecting the pavement right of way.

2) SNOW PLAN:

2.1 Scope and Intent:

The Snow Plan was designed to enhance pedestrian safety in the event of slippery winter conditions where, during previous years, there had been a number of injuries. These injuries had occurred in areas of high activity where compression of snow underfoot formed underlying areas of ice, and on pavement gradients where traction was minimal anyway.

The core areas of pedestrian activity were deemed to be the central commercial and medical zone (Wood Lane), along with access to the primary school and library (Grove Road), along with interconnecting rights of way. Pavements from the Peppard Road up steep gradients to both these areas were considered vital access routes and were also included in the plan, as was Widmore Lane.

The Snow Plan does not replace the responsibility of commercial, public or private owners of land to ensure that access to their own premises are safe for public use. The Parish Council has reminded all such owners of their responsibilities to ensure safe passage.

2.2 Prevention is better than cure:

With the capability to refine weather forecasts to the specific location and elevation of Sonning Common on the Chilterns foothills, the Snow Team Volunteers were able to pre-grit and salt some hours ahead of any significant snowfall or freezing rain forecast.

Including one training day to gain experience on new equipment and to develop techniques, there were three pre-emptive salting sessions and one day of manual snow clearing with brooms and shovels, assisted in one location by a mini-snow plough.

The sixteen volunteers were on call at any time of day for three months and did a magnificent job. Our thanks to all of them. One early lesson learned was that it is easier to push 50 kilograms of salt spreader downhill than uphill! Salting teams were in radio contact with a re-supply vehicle which speeded up the rate of salting such that the entire salting program could be completed in 90 minutes, using about 300 kilos of salt over about five miles of surfaces.

2.3 Conclusions:

The Snow Plan was efficient and cost effective for the two days where we had significant snow and the learning curve will enable more efficiency next winter.

If the recent precipitation (rainfall) were to have happened during last February's snow fall period, we would have had just over five feet of snow...and a very tired snow team.

3) JAPANESE KNOTWEED:

3.1 This is no ordinary weed:

The Japanese Knotweed is not only very destructive but has an incredible survival technique which makes it almost impossible to eradicate. Its roots grow at feet per day and can fragment hard surfaces and walls of buildings.

Any fragment of this weed bigger than a grain of rice can create a new plant! Unless it, and all its roots, are carefully removed without damage and disposed of in accordance with National Guidelines, it will grow back or contaminate other areas.

Recognition of it, and handling it correctly, is paramount if it is to be controlled or eradicated.

Comprehensive guidelines are currently available on the community website

(www.sonningcommonparish.co.uk).

3.2 Survey:

In order to ascertain the degree of outbreaks and their locations, everyone is requested to report all sightings to the Parish Clerk or to Cllr. Dirk Jones.

WIDMORE POND – Jane Diwell

Widmore Pond Committee Report 2011-2012

The Widmore Pond Committee is an independent group of volunteers which was founded by Dick Denning (a Parish Councillor, now sadly deceased) in the mid-1970s, and it has looked after the pond ever since then. Its objectives include managing the pond and its surrounding habitats sympathetically and improving the pond and raising public awareness of it. The main pond and immediate surroundings is owned by Sonning Common Parish Council. There is a small conjoined overflow pond at the rear, not visible from the road, (and currently dry) known as the "Back Pond" which is owned by Blounts Farm.

The pond is thought not to be a natural feature but to have been formed by rainwater draining into a hollow, the sunken remnant of a filled-in open-cast mine, from which iron ore was probably extracted in Romano-British times. There is a high iron content in the soil and there are geophysical anomalies in the surrounding fields which may be the remains of kilns. There may have been ancient iron working and glass and pottery-making in the area.

Widmore Lane was once the main road but since the B481 was built the pond no longer has to provide water for horses or cattle or the boilers of passing steam-engines as it once did, but serves the need of the village as a duck pond and a nature reserve, a peaceful beauty spot.

In the past year the Pond Committee has visually monitored the condition of the pond and carried out maintenance work to the bank and shingle area, fed the ducks, and controlled rats (which unfortunately will always be attracted by the presence of duck food). From time to time the population of fish has to be controlled. Overall the pond and pond area is in satisfactory condition, but work is scheduled soon to cut back overgrown vegetation and a bench needs to be replaced.

The Committee has gratefully received the very kind offer of a donation from a Parishioner for the replacement of the bench on the North side, and this is being sourced at present.

The pond sometimes exhibits a bloom of blue-green algae in hot weather, but this is not usually a problem unless people come into contact with the water, which they should not, as both swimming and fishing are banned.

Following a request from the Sonning Common Society, the Committee is to produce an informative display board for the pond, which will give a brief history of the pond and describe the flora and fauna to be found there.

It is expected that at a Parish Council meeting in the near future the Widmore Pond Committee will be established as a Standing Committee of the Parish Council, with direct accountability to it in financial matters and otherwise.